

***TEACHERS OF ANATOMY AND VISUAL PATHOLOGY: TWO STRATEGIES ON HOW TO LIBERATE  
“DOUBLY DEAD” SPECIMEN COLLECTIONS***

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Having physical walls and collections, but a “virtual” medical museum (one that is yet to be founded) is a job for an optimist. This illustrated paper outlines two strategies, entitled, Teachers of Anatomy and Visual Pathology used to liberate, redefine and repurpose “doubly dead” collections (i.e. historical human anatomical, pathological and surgical specimens) no longer actively used.

From 1891 to 1950, the museums of anatomy, pathology and surgical pathology assisted the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston (UTMB) achieve a national reputation for excellence in practical medical education. Perhaps uniquely for the State of Texas, the museums were also open to the public. During the late 1950s, the museums were dismantled; and while some of the specimens were still utilized by their host departments up until the 1990s, the bulk of the collections were eventually placed in storage.

UTMB’s “notable” anatomical museum was founded in 1891 by an Edinburgh born and trained anatomist, William Keiller, M.D. (1861-1931). (1) An accomplished artist, Keiller criticized the craze for photography in medicine and

instead created hundreds of large scale anatomical drawings for educational use. (2)

In 2017, fine art photographer, Steve Fisher, Ph.D., (Associate Professor of Physical Therapy, UTMB), began photographing the remnants of UTMB's historical anatomical specimen collection, including those prepared by Keiller and his students.

Approximately one thousand late nineteenth-mid twentieth century wet, dry and wax anatomical specimens are currently stored in two poorly lit overcrowded rooms housed in a former dissection laboratory on the top (third) floor of *Old Red* (UTMB's original 1890 medical school building).

Fisher observed:

"The anatomical preparations were created in the late 19th and early 20th century by medical school anatomists. The methods and artistry of that era to produce what was at the time an integral part of the school's anatomy curriculum are mostly lost to time. Although they are now seldom in public view, overseers of the collection are working to better understand their conservation requirements and ultimately give them new a purpose educating students and the public about their important contributions to the teaching and practice of medicine. For me, this ongoing photographic project (*Teachers of Anatomy*) is in the spirit of that effort; it's a *homage* of sorts to the teachers of anatomy: the preparators, the instructors - and most of all to the persons I photographed who played no small part in the history of medicine." (3)

Fisher's exquisite photographs of intricately dissected, injected and labelled anatomical specimens (that transcend the scientific to the aesthetic) were displayed in a pop-up exhibition in Keiller's former anatomical dissection laboratory in *Old Red*, several feet from where the specimens are stored.

Perhaps unwittingly, Fisher had been drawn to the refined aesthetics of anatomical specimens prepared by Keiller's successor to the Chair of Anatomy, Harry O. Knight, M.D. (1880-1939). Unquestionably, Knight created some of UTMB's most intricate and masterful anatomical preparations. He was a renaissance man, and a visionary with a sense of humour. When applying for membership of the American Association of Anatomists (which was contingent upon a number of published academic papers), Knight informed the executive committee that he had "one publication and it was magnificent" (meaning the anatomical museum). (4)

Knight's curatorial endeavors came to an abrupt halt on the morning of 5th October, 1939. While in the basement of a medical school building, he put a loaded pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. Knight died on route to the nearby John Sealy Hospital. One of Knight's former colleagues criticized him for spending an inordinate amount of time building up the anatomical museum, rather than publishing the results of his research (a *sine qua non* for a tenured professor). Over the subsequent decades, Knight's curatorial legacy was dismantled and put into storage alongside the remnants of the former anatomical museum.

Given that the *Teachers of Anatomy* exhibition was held in the heart of the medical school, which access was by invitation only, there were few ethical, legal or public relations concerns.

UTMB's pathological museum was founded in 1891 by Allen J. Smith, M.D. (1863-1926), the medical school's first Chair of Pathology. In 1914, a museum of surgical pathology was founded by the Chair of Surgery, James E. Thompson, M.D. (1863-1927). The remnants of these museums (approximately nine hundred specimens) are currently stored together in one location on the Galveston campus.

Beginning in 2018, these collections were utilized as the initial point of reference and inspiration for a temporary exhibition entitled, *Visual Pathology*. The title of the exhibition was derived from a doctoral thesis which focused on late-nineteenth century of clinical photography in Glasgow, Scotland. (5) "Visual" and "pathology" are very powerful words, perhaps even more so when placed in succession. This exhibition is not concerned with "visual pathology", (for example, prosopagnosia, an inability to recognize a face, nor agnosia, a loss of ability to recognize objects, persons, sounds, shapes, or smells). *Visual Pathology* instead aims to shed light on the intense relationship between the visual and the pathological.

Five local (Galveston-Houston, Texas) artists (including a sculptor, photographer and videographer) were selected by the Galveston Arts Center (GAC) curator, Dennis Nance. Seven pathologists (including faculty and residents from UTMB's Department of Pathology) volunteered to participate in the *Visual Pathology* project after it was announced during pathology grand rounds, early in 2018. The project will culminate in a temporary exhibition at the GAC from August to October, 2018.

The artists and pathologists were given access to the historical pathological and surgical pathology specimen collections. The collections served as an inspirational starting point. Both artists and pathologists worked in teams to consider the history of the collections and their relationship to current research in pathology. The project aims to enhance a greater public understanding and appreciation (not only for the collections) but also the role of the visual in pathology.

In her introductory essay to the *Visual Pathology* exhibition, Judith F. Aronson, M.D., Director of UTMB's Autopsy Service, wrote:

"All this reflection makes me wonder whether artists and pathologists "see" differently. A pathologist approaches their visual image with sets of rules and criteria in mind. Images are fit into pre-determined diagnostic categories. But do pathologists miss seeing things that an artist might see? Is the artist free to experiment and imagine from the visual starting point? Does the pathologist have more sensitivity to subtle visual details or more finely tuned powers of observation? Where the pathologist uses the visual to engage the mind, does the artist use the visual to engage the heart? And what visual ferment occurs when artist and pathologist collaborate?" (6)

Unlike, *Teachers of Anatomy*, *Visual Pathology* was aimed towards a broader audience in the context of a publicly accessible gallery. As such, it brought into sharp focus not only the legal, but the ethical and public relations concerns surrounding the specimen collections (including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 -"HIPAA"- and a recent Texas law governing fetal remains). (7, 8) As the artists worked in a variety of media including painting, drawing, and sculpture their original source(s) of inspiration (e.g. a specimen) would not be recognizable, of course, the fine art photographs were another matter.

Not all curators of medical museums (virtual or otherwise) are at liberty to share fully their collections with the world. While some institutions have attempted or appear to bury their collections, the creators of *Teachers of Anatomy* and *Visual Pathology* aimed to liberate, redefine and give a new purpose to the "doubly dead" historical specimen collections. (9) These exhibitions have brought to light just some of the complexities we (and UTMB) will face as we endeavor to showcase UTMB's historical anatomical, pathological and surgical specimen collections in a (future) medical museum located in the State of Texas.

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